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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 SINGAPORE 002115

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [SN](#) [BM](#) [ASEAN](#)  
SUBJECT: BURMESE REGIME'S MANEUVERS AT ASEAN SUMMIT REMOVED  
"ASEAN COVER" FOR BURMA, SAYS SINGAPORE PM'S PRIVATE  
SECRETARY

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REF: A. SINGAPORE 2075  
[1](#)B. SINGAPORE 2086

Classified By: Ambassador Patricia L. Herbold. Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)  
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[1](#)1. (C) Summary: The Burmese regime's maneuvers at the ASEAN-related meetings in Singapore, especially the regime's reversing course and preventing UN Special Advisor Gambari from briefing the East Asia Summit, removed Burma's "ASEAN cover," Singapore Prime Minister Lee's Principal Private Secretary Lawrence Wong told the DCM and E/P Chief. Wong

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said Burma's moves had hurt ASEAN's credibility and fed the perception that the ASEAN-related meetings had been a failure. He argued, however, that Burma would no longer be able to look to ASEAN for support if Burma issues are taken up in the UN. (MFA Southeast Asia Director Peter Tan said the same thing in a separate conversation.) Wong said this will put China on the spot. Singapore had encouraged Philippines President Arroyo's public warning to Burma to move toward democracy, he said. The November 20 ASEAN Chairman's statement had put on record both Burma's recalcitrance and the demands for change of "most leaders" of ASEAN, Wong said. The DCM stressed that ASEAN countries, collectively and individually, need to stay engaged and press for change in Burma. End Summary.

Burma Pulls the Plug  
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[1](#)2. (C) Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's Principal Private Secretary Lawrence Wong described for the DCM and E/P Chief

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November 26 the maneuvering that led up to Burma's pulling the plug on UN Special Advisor Ibrahim Gambari's planned briefing of the East Asia Summit (EAS), part of the ASEAN-related cycle of summit meetings held here November 18-22 (reftels). As ASEAN Chair, Singapore had planned the Gambari briefing to permit a frank exchange of views with Burma while at the same time demonstrating support both for Gambari's mission and for Burma's modest steps so far to cooperate with it. Burma had initially indicated it would accept the briefing, Wong said, but then during the ASEAN

summit rejected the plan, insisting that ASEAN had no role to play and that Burma would only work through the UN process.

13. (C) Wong said that Singapore had sent Senior Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Zainul Abidin Rasheed to Burma the week before the summits to obtain Burmese Prime Minister General Thein Sein's endorsement of the Gambari briefing to the EAS. Thein Sein had agreed to a briefing "if it is good for Myanmar," which Singapore took as an affirmative response. (An MFA source told us separately that Singapore had faced stronger resistance from China, which would only agree to an "informal" Gambari briefing of the EAS - see ref B.) Burma subsequently sent Singapore two letters, with the first letter objecting to the Gambari briefing and the second explicitly urging that it not take place. Wong said that obstacle was apparently overcome during the ASEAN summit when ASEAN Foreign Ministers, including Burma's FM, agreed early on November 19 to a Gambari briefing of the ASEAN summit, rather than the EAS. (NOTE: Presumably the difference for Burma was that a discussion within the "ASEAN family" would be less confrontational and "public" than one involving leaders of ASEAN plus China, Japan, South Korea, India, Australia and New Zealand. END NOTE.) However, later on November 19, just before the planned informal dinner of ASEAN leaders, Burma PM Thein Sein rejected any interaction between Gambari and ASEAN or the EAS, insisting that Gambari should only report to the UN, Wong said.

Burma PM Under Orders  
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14. (C) Wong described how the Burma issue came to a head during the November 19 leaders-only working dinner. Although the dinner was leaders-only, Wong said he had to go in and out of several times to assist PM Lee in addressing the Burma issue. Wong said most ASEAN leaders reacted with disbelief that Burma wanted to cut ASEAN out of the process and "go it alone" with the UN and the international community, and tried to persuade Thein Sein that it would not be in Burma's interests to do so. Thein Sein made it clear, however, that

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he had "orders" from regime leaders and had no flexibility. Wong said Singapore had alerted China in the hope of getting Chinese help in persuading Burma to change its approach, but Beijing had evidently not been able to decide quickly whether it should weigh in.

15. (C) As reported ref B, Wong indicated that Burma's objections brought back into the open divisions between newer ASEAN members (Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia and Burma) inclined to support the Burmese regime and the older ASEAN members (Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippine, Singapore, and Thailand) among whom frustration with the regime is high. He claimed that Singapore had actively encouraged Philippines President Arroyo to take a tough stand during the dinner, in which she warned that the Philippines may have trouble ratifying the ASEAN Charter if Burma does not quickly undertake meaningful democratic change. Wong said that the leaders became personally involved during and after the dinner in editing the ASEAN Chairman's Statement that Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong read out to the press at around midnight, with all the ASEAN leaders except Thein Sein standing at his side. Thein Sein had seen an early version of the draft statement and had not offered any comments or edits, Wong said.

ASEAN Cover Removed  
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16. (C) Wong said Burma's moves had hurt ASEAN's credibility and fed the perception that the ASEAN-related meetings had been a failure. He regretted that Gambari had been unable to do a formal briefing of ASEAN or the EAS, but he argued that the outcome could have been worse. Wong said as far as he knew the only countries in the EAS whose representatives

Gambari was not able to brief informally in Singapore were Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos and India.

¶17. (C) Wong said Burma's rejection of an ASEAN role had removed Burma's "ASEAN cover" and opened the door to the November 20 ASEAN Chairman's statement that had put on record both Burma's recalcitrance and the demands for change of "most leaders" of ASEAN. When we questioned Wong's assertion that "constructive engagement is now over," Wong acknowledged that Burma's status within ASEAN would not change but he insisted that Burma could no longer count on ASEAN's help or protection if, for example, action were contemplated in UNSC. Wong speculated that China would be unhappy with Burma's rejection of an ASEAN role as this left China on the spot and facing more pressure to address Burma's problems. The DCM stressed that Burma's rejection of an ASEAN role would not change expectations that ASEAN members, individually and collectively, must use their influence to promote change in Burma.

¶18. (C) In a separate conversation with the DCM on November 28, MFA Southeast Asia Directorate Director Peter Tan said Singapore sees the next Gambari visit to Burma as the appropriate focus of efforts to promote democratic change there. Tan reaffirmed Wong's point that Burma had made its choice to interact directly with the UN, without ASEAN playing a role. This means ASEAN will not protect Burma if the UN decides to take action. There used to be no common ASEAN position on Burma. Now, following the Singapore summits, there is a common ASEAN position: to stay out of Burma's interactions with the UN. Singapore and ASEAN oppose sanctions on Burma, but will comply with any UN sanctions that might be passed, he stated. The DCM told Tan the ASEAN states cannot stand on the sidelines. ASEAN needs to engage Burma to promote democratic change, he stated.

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